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January 2002

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Recommended Citation

National Smokejumper Association, "Smokejumper Obituary: Waite, Jim Vernon (Missoula 1940)" (2002).
Smokejumper Obituaries. 1202.
https://dc.ewu.edu/smokejumper_bios/1202

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Smokejumper Obituary

Waite, Jim Vernon (Missoula 1940)

Pioneer smokejumper Jim Waite died June 4, 1999, in Walla Walla, Washington. Jim was born in 1917 in Okanogan, WA, and grew up in Kooskia, Idaho. In 1940, Jim represented the Clearwater National Forest in the initial smokejumper program and continued his jumping career through the 1951 season. He and Rufus Robinson made the 2nd fire jump in US history on July 15, 1940, on the Robin Creek Fire on the Nez Perce NF. Jim made three fire jumps that season.

Soon after, Jim transferred to the US Air Force Air Research and Development Command. His duties included parachute development testing for the Air Force and NASA, including testing of the parachutes for the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo projects. He retired at the end of 1973. At the time of his death, Jim was living in Walla Walla, WA.

From a 2004 with Smokejumper magazine, Smokey Alexander remembers Jim. "Jim Waite came off the Clearwater NF. He had been a smokechaser and lookout. I don't believe he ever went to college. He came out of high school and went to work for the Forest Service. Jim was a squadleader for the CPS (conscientious objectors) jumpers during WWII.

"I first met Jim when we took our physicals for smokejumping. He was very quiet, very unassuming. In addition to being a nice guy, he was very handsome. Lucky for the rest of us, he had a steady girl back in Idaho. After our physicals we all went up to the Seeley Lake RS and got ready for our first parachute jump. Jim was the first rookie in our group to make a jump."

(end of excerpt)